



Best Practices for Joining and Participating on Advisory Committees

How-to Guides



What is an Advisory Committee?

An advisory committee is defined as a group that works with an agency, established by statute or an agency official, to make recommendations on strategic issues or policies, which are within the scope of the agency's responsibilities. The group may be in the form of a committee, board, commission, council, conference, panel, task force, subcommittee or other subgroup. Usually advisory committees aim to represent a balanced point of view and may include scientific members, legal council, lay members, business representatives, and consumer advocates.

In this Guide, you will find a thorough explanation of advisory committees, including the role of the lay advocate, different types of advisory committees, time commitments involved in participation, and conflicts of interest. Furthermore, this guide lays out:



Best Practices for Joining Advisory Committees, and



Best Practices for Participation on Advisory Committees

There are many different types of work done by advisory committees ranging from making recommendations on directions for scientific research to conducting needs assessments. Each institute or center has its own set of statutory purviews, which in theory are the same, though the wording may vary by institute or center. For example at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the statutory purview for Institute or Center Advisory Councils generally is:

- to approve the grant portfolio,
- to provide input into strategic directions and planning for the institute or center,
- to recommend special funding directions or proposals for high program priority or special emphasis, and
- to consider appeals from grant applicants who feel their proposal did not receive fair review.

Advisory committees for the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) "...are groups of experts from outside the agency that FDA sometimes turns to for help on complex scientific, technical, and policy issues."



In considering recommendations for special funding and grant appeals, in general, the advisory committee does not examine the quality of the science. When considering the need for special emphasis or high program priority, the advisory committee discusses the demands and unique opportunities for investment in a particular scientific arena. For a grant appeal, the committee acts like an appellate court, reviewing not the scientific validity of the proposal, but rather such elements as proper assignment to a fairly appointed study section. This is to ensure that the grant application was given a fair review.



What is the role of the lay member of an Advisory Committee?

The lay member offers a unique and valuable perspective to an advisory committee, particularly if it is comprised primarily of scientists. The opinions of the lay member represent the greater world outside the research community, offering a broader perspective. However, lay members may have conflicts of interest and need to be upfront about their desire to address the issues they care most about, such as the health of an individual or a specific condition. At times, scientific members of advisory committees are tempted to utilize their technical expertise and to re-engage the science of a policy, grant application, or high program priority. The lay member can serve to remind the advisory committee that it is not to be a substitute for peer-review, but rather to stay focused on the stated role and purview of the committee.



What are the different types of advisory committees and how do you join them?

The process of nomination differs for each advisory committee and this requires advance homework so that nominees from your organization are well positioned for consideration.



State: You join state committees by invitation. Their role is usually about policy, which can be useful if your organization can benefit from the work being done in that committee.



Local: Ask colleagues, advisors, local hospitals and government agencies about possible committees and how you can be involved. Hospital committees can be very important as you can impact how they provide services for your community.



Federal: You join federal committees by invitation. Examples include the following:

- 1) Secretary's Advisory Committee on Genetics, Health and Society
- 2) Advisory Committee on Heritable Disorders in Newborns and Children
- 3) NCI Clinical Trial Cooperative Groups
- 4) NIH COPR (Council of Public Representatives)

These all vary in their process for accepting new members, from committees that require Executive Branch approval, to simpler ones where only the committee leadership is needed to approve membership.



It is important to let a senior staff member of the agency of your choosing know of your interest. To be considered for nomination, simply ask if your experience would be of value to the entity and its senior leadership.

 **Nonprofit:** You may be asked to sit on advisory committees for nonprofit organizations. These can be both collaborative and instructional, especially if you are new to serving.

 **Industry:** You may join industry committees by invitation. Membership on these committees affords you access to an industry perspective, knowledge about the product development pipeline, the challenges of industry to both make a profit and do good, and the difficulties that being focused on profit bring to the endeavor. It may also be the beginning of future collaborations. These collaborations can be varied and can range from you providing information as they set policy to actual contract agreements.

How much time do most committees take?

This varies based on the committee. Most advisory committees meet a couple times a year for a day or two. Some meet more frequently for only a few hours. Additionally, most require that you read materials in preparation for the meeting, while some will ask you to be involved in writing reports or white papers. Therefore, it is important to ask what kind of a time commitment will be required.

How do I determine if I have time to devote to an advisory committee when my organization needs me?

Advisory committees are often in the position of effecting systems change, and therefore can offer you a great deal of return for your investment. Achieving balance is the key. Advisory committees that impact your organization's mission, even if just theoretically, are worth the time spent since you have the opportunity to focus their views to better match the needs of the patients and families you represent. More importantly, it is critical that advocates think about the bigger picture of transforming systems to have a greater impact for the greater good.

What are conflicts of interest?

Usually this refers to vested interests, or receipt of remunerations from a private entity. A conflict occurs when one's own agenda is at the fore, and the individual does not recognize that it impedes the greater good. It is critical when trying to affect whole systems that all individuals lay their conflicts on the table: this means nonprofit and personal, as well as financial, interests. Most importantly, it is incumbent upon all to acknowledge these conflicts of interest, realize that they impede forward progress, and if necessary, recuse themselves.





Best Practices for Joining Advisory Committees

As in all aspects of leadership, it is important that several members from your organization are trained to serve on advisory committees. You also need to have a succession plan in case a serving member must leave a committee. You must be attentive to which committees require invitations, nominations, or recommendations so that you can make sure the committee leadership is aware of your interests.



Where should I situate myself to benefit my organization?

Your organization should always be looking for ways to improve its reach and its dissemination networks to become more valuable. Network as much as possible at the events you attend. The importance of networking cannot be overstated. Be strategic in your networking. What are your organizations' immediate needs? What category of individuals can help you advance your organization's goals? Join organizations and attend meetings where you will meet the kinds of people that can potentially help you. Don't be shy or self-conscious when at meetings and receptions, though it is common for people to want to stay within social comfort zones. Situate and seat yourself with people you do not know in order to expand your network.

Express your desire to participate to those in the position to help you gain access. Ignore the teachings that modesty being a virtue and self-promotion is somehow distasteful. Think of yourself as a *conduit for the cause*, seeking an advisory committee position to advance your *knowledge* and *network* – which ultimately helps advance your cause. If there are opportunities to self-nominate for a committee, just do it! If a formal nomination is needed, ask a more experienced advocate for advice about who within your circles would be the best choice for a nominator. Then let that individual know of your interest in serving. Make it easier for that person to agree to nominate you by offering to draft the letter of nomination.



How do you analyze your own knowledge base?

Know your value in every situation. That way you can use your strengths and make your voice heard. You most likely are the only person with your unique skill set – whether it is working with patients, organizing research, defining best practices for care, or understanding a specific system. Remember that you understand the nuances of issues that can be potentially addressed by your committee. Whether it is a law, policy, research, treatment or service, you have valuable knowledge to contribute.





Best Practices for Participation on Advisory Committees

Do your homework and familiarize yourself with the positions being discussed. Don't be afraid to ask someone on the committee for more background information prior to the meeting, or to help you understand points with which you are not familiar. Come into the meeting with a deep understanding of the issues, questions about what is not clear, issues that you feel need more discussion, and some initial conclusions. Stay open in the meetings to new information and continually assess any decisions or conclusions. Be sure to voice your views during the discussion phase. Do not repeat what someone else has said – time is of the essence – and no one wants to hear you say, “Well, Tom just made my point, and I agree.” It does not increase your credibility to reiterate what someone else says. Instead, look for places that you can advance the overall understanding and help to encourage all stakeholder perspectives.

When the meeting moves to the solution phase, state your thoughts and ideas. Keep in mind the larger goals and the greater vision when making decisions in the committee. Ask the difficult questions that everyone else is avoiding. Be professional and focus on achievable results. As a public partner, remind others of the purpose of the committee – call the group's attention to “what matters” so that they can make their best decisions.

Some other key things to remember about participation in Advisory Committees:

-  Make positive statements. For example say, “We have found that...,” or “I have observed...” Do not make qualifying statements that devalue your opinion such as, “I don't have a scientific background but...” unless you have an informal relationship in a small committee.
-  Serving on a committee is like being a member of an extended family. It takes time for people to trust and respect you and your opinion so view each meeting as a building block. You may be the first *advocate* people on this committee have ever worked with. Having “patient focused” discussions are the norm for you but more than likely not for others on your committee. Your views and your opinions may seem out of the ordinary, so always voice them in the context of a solution. Analogies can also work well, so use them if you feel they strengthen your statements. Thus, you will not only add to the discussion but also model a productive relationship between stakeholders.
-  Synthesize and share information from all of your advisory committees.
-  Stay in touch with those affected by the condition you represent. Participate in support groups by attending meetings, and reading newsletters so you can bring relevant



concerns to the committee. Continue to gain knowledge in the field by attending national meetings, talking to experts, and reading articles.

-  Ironically, leave your disease at the door. Just your organization's name at the table will get your disease noticed. This is very important, especially in public advisory positions. It is unethical to do otherwise, and your colleagues will resent your participation if you continually try to push your personal agenda. The higher level systems changes that you can precipitate are far more important in the long run than getting your disease or issue *plugged* for the moment. The mere fact that your nametag or roster listing states your affiliation raises visibility for your cause. However, if any discussions directly touch upon a broader, yet underrepresented issue, it *would be appropriate* to voice that broader public view. For example, while you would not want to advocate for the specific issue of lymphatic diseases, you could speak about the broader, often neglected issue of rare disorders, collectively.
-  Take what you learned back to your organization. One of the most valuable benefits about serving on an advisory committee is that it affords you a unique opportunity to learn in greater depth about the emerging trends, policy concerns and inner workings of a federal agency. You can learn how systems work so as to better navigate and develop strategic positions to be able to tap into and benefit from the system.
-  If people respect your point of view in the advisory committee, they will be willing to listen to you outside of it.
-  Pay attention to the dynamics of the group.
-  Suggest other people who should be at the table.

Serving on an advisory committee can broaden your view, enable you to do more than if you work only with your organization, and give you new tools to improve the systems in which you work. Balanced with your day-to-day work, this kind of service can catapult not only your work, but that of systems in general.

